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Posted on Mon, May. 30, 2005

Goats are heroes for some growers

FORMER TOBACCO FARMERS TAP NEW, EXPANDING MARKET

By Beverly Fortune
HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

CYNTHIANA - Larry Yearsley looked like the Pied Piper as he walked toward his barn carrying a bucket of feed, dozens of goats trip, trip, tripping behind.

"With a bucket of food, you can lead them anywhere," he said.

Yearsley bought his first goats five years ago. Today he has a herd of more than 80 nannies and kids on the farm where he grew up, renamed Just Kiddin' Boer Goats Farm.

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Yearsley, 58, a lifelong tobacco farmer until this year, sees goats as a bright spot in Kentucky agriculture for farmers seeking crops to replace lost tobacco income.

He is not alone.

Kentucky's goat population ranks sixth in the nation with 70,000 animals, according to a survey released earlier this year by the Kentucky Agricultural Statistics Service -- a meteoric leap from 16,223 goats in 1997.

Most are boer goats from South Africa, bred for their meat. However, some farmers are raising milk goats, hoping to make gourmet goat cheese and ice cream.

The goat industry is one of the fastest-growing segments of Kentucky agriculture, state Agriculture Commissioner Richie Farmer said in February.

"We're not even scratching the surface in meeting demand," said Ray Bowman, a Franklin County goat farmer and president of the Kentucky Goat Producers Association. "Fifty percent of the goat eaten in the United States is imported."

Kentucky goat goes to other states

The demand comes from a growing ethnic population, particularly Muslim, Hispanics and Indians, who eat goat, Bowman said. "Eighty percent of the world population eats goat," he said.

In 2001, the United States imported 5.732 metric tons of chilled and frozen goat meat, said Tess Caudill, goat marketing specialist with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. "That figure doubled from 1997 to 2001."

A survey of the state's meat goat industry in 2002 estimated that more than 3.5 million goat consumers live within a 250-mile radius of Kentucky, she said.

Very little goat meat produced in Kentucky stays in the state. It is shipped to large metropolitan areas such as St. Louis, Memphis, Chicago and New York.

Goat meat is very nutritious, Bowman said, low in fat and calories. A 3-ounce serving has 122 calories and 2.6 grams of fat, compared with 162 calories and 6.3 fat grams in the same size portion of chicken.

Krishan Sehgal, owner of Vishal Market on Euclid Avenue, sells frozen goat meat for \$3.99 a pound. Critchfield Meats in Zandale Center has frozen goat and can get whole fresh goats on request. "We're getting more and more requests. It's an ethnic product right now," said Mike Critchfield, one of the owners.

A good fit for the state

Kentucky's climate, topography and small family farms make goats a viable industry, farmers say.

"We have a lot of really rough, hilly ground all across the state, and goats can thrive on that type ground," said Michelle Watts in Mercer County. She and her husband Bobby have 1,000 goats, she said, one of the largest herds east of the Mississippi River.

Bowman said goats find Kentucky vegetation tasty. "Goats do very well on small farms, and on land overgrown with kudzu, bush honeysuckle and other undesirable species." Goats prefer scrub growth "where cattle don't find it palatable."

Because of their size and even disposition, goats can be managed without hiring additional help, Yearsley said. "With cattle, tobacco, even with vegetables, you have to have help to raise that crop. With goats, I can do all the work myself."

Goats are not without problems, mainly parasites and foot rot because of Kentucky's high rainfall and humidity. "Goats are prone to parasites. Worms can wipe out a goat herd if you don't pay close attention and treat the problem," he said.

Bowman gave credit for the increase in goat farming to Kentucky Department of Agriculture goat-marketing specialist Tess Caudill.

Caudill came up with the idea for graded sales, like cattle.

"Goats of similar quality and weight are grouped together, and we sell them in lots," she said. Meat buyers attend the sales. Grading increases competition for the meat goats and boosts the price.

At the Barren River Graded Goat Sale earlier this month, 175 goats were sold at an average of \$1.40 a pound, "an excellent price," Caudill said.

The department also sells goats over the telephone in Tel-O-Auctions.

Fallout from tobacco money

Several farmers say Phase I tobacco money helped the goat industry become established in Kentucky.

In Henry County, the Agricultural Development Council gave the Henry County Boer Goat Association a total of \$130,000 over four years to set up a model boer goat program. Educational programs and field days were organized, and guest speakers including veterinarians and animal nutritionists were brought in.

"We'd get as many as 50 people from Henry and surrounding counties at meetings," said Keith Jefferies, a Henry County goat farmer. He described the tobacco money as "a real key to our success."

The county now serves as a regional center of information for goat farmers, he said.

"Nobody believes any one thing can replace tobacco, but goats can certainly figure in," Caudill said.

In good years, the Watts family made \$800 an acre on tobacco grown in Mercer County and raised about 100 acres, Michelle Watts said. "If you run five to seven meat goats per acre, you could potentially make about \$1,000 an acre off goats."

The Wattses' main focus is raising and selling high-quality breeding stock. On May 21, they hosted the Fort Harrod Goat Association spring sale at their farm, selling 100 full-blooded, registered and percentage does and 10 full-blooded bucks.

"In the livestock business, you upgrade every time you can," said Eugene Bottoms of Wilmore, who said he recently sold a doe in a Virginia auction for \$2,400 and a buck for \$1,500.

Last week, he bought a buck in Texas for \$3,500. "He's here in the barn. We will use him ourselves."

Said Bottoms, "We got some top breeding stock in the United States in Kentucky right now. We also have one of the best kid markets in terms of quality and price in the United States. We compare to Texas prices."